

Copyright 2005 Muskogee Daily Phoenix and Times-Democrat (Muskogee, OK)
All Rights Reserved
Muskogee Daily Phoenix and Times-Democrat (Oklahoma)

September 4, 2005 Sunday

LENGTH: 1293 words

HEADLINE: Rerun for all needing

BODY:

College networking puts on a new face

GNS Technology package for Sept. 2

Editors: Moving on Financial and Lifestyle wires. Note breakout box at end.

By NISHAD MAJMUDAR

The (Rochester, N.Y.) Democrat and Chronicle

College students are addicted to networking like no one else.

The Facebook, www.thefacebook.com, began in February 2004 as an Internet-based social network for students at Harvard University, where the Web site's inventors were undergraduates.

It now links about 3.5 million college students and alumni at more than 800 universities and colleges, says Facebook spokesman Chris Hughes, making it a lucrative medium for advertisers.

"It can be a good networking tool and help you stay in contact with people from high school," says David Merkle, 19, a University of Rochester (N.Y.) sophomore who logs onto thefacebook.com twice a day. "I probably use it too often."

All one needs to join the network free of charge is a college ".edu" e-mail address, although Facebook does not have any formal agreements with the colleges it connects. The site uses its own servers; students can join once Facebook's administrators add their school to the network.

Users can customize profiles with a digital picture and personal data such as hometown, field of study, political views, favorite books and movies, cell phone numbers and relationship status.

Users also control their level of privacy. They can make their profile viewable only to members who attend their college or to any Facebook user.

"It is useful in a sense because you get to know more people around campus," said Idem Assiongbon, a senior international business student at Rochester Institute of Technology. "It's something we really should try to exploit even further."

Assiongbon says his roommate uses his Facebook profile to organize parties.

"We (students) don't interact that much considering our schedules," Assiongbon, 22, says. "Most people check events on the Internet."

Users add friends to their networks by "facebooking" them, or asking them to be a friend by clicking on a special link. Students also can become Facebook friends with people at other colleges and find old friends using Facebook's high school search. Once a user receives a friend request, he or she can log on to Facebook to approve or reject it, allowing for electronic validation of a friendship or impersonal, shame-free rejection.

"There was one guy who tried to befriend everybody," says Jorge Leon, 19, who will be a junior computer science student at the University of Rochester this fall. "On Facebook, the definition of 'friends' is not friends, it's someone you say 'hi' to when you pass."

Some students add only the members of their inner social circle as friends, while others browse their college's network and indiscriminately "friend" people they've had chance encounters with. And, of course, a Facebook user can solicit friendships with students or alumni at other colleges on the Facebook network.

"I see some people with 400 friends and that can't be true," says Leon, who has more than 190 friends on his Facebook.

Members also can form Facebook groups for a broad spectrum of interests.

Groups formed by RIT Facebook members include "Normal RIT students" or "It's Soda, not Pop," for students disputing the soft drink vernacular.

Members can also write on a friend's "wall," an editable message board in each profile, or send private messages.

Members can also add their course schedules to their profiles, allowing them to browse the people in their classes.

Just a novelty?

Though a college e-mail address is needed to log in, graduating students can keep their accounts. The first Facebook-using classes graduated in 2004 and 2005, forming a network of Facebook "alumni" who update their profiles with graduate school or professional information.

One Facebook alumna questions whether the site will be useful for graduates who have overcome the site's novelty.

"There's almost too much on it in order for many people to continue to use it into their 30s," says Megan Walter, 22, a graduate student at UR.

"You connect with too many friends and join too many groups, and it becomes too much for it to be useful in a short type of check, like an e-mail account."

But some Facebook users update their profiles consistently, and that can help with keeping tabs on friends. "I get to see new pictures that friends put up, so I keep up with their everyday lives that way," Walter says.

Facebook does face competition from other social networks, such as Friendster.com and MySpace.com.

Friendster, which is targeted toward more than just a collegiate audience, claims more than 16 million members.

"The statistic that's most different between Facebook and other sites is its daily return rate," says Hughes, the Facebook spokesman. "The original idea was rooted in the notion of Facebook as a directory of information that's very useful but also fun and entertaining. It's not this large, open anonymous network. It's much more about being a mirror of your real social interactions."

Facebook value

The site may be a simple novelty to most of its users, but behind the interface that students find so appealing is a million-dollar business in the making.

Hughes said the site was originally intended for Harvard students as a wired-in substitute for the "freshman facebooks," an established, printed version containing "bad freshman-year ID photos and boring information," he said.

But the popularity of the site, developed by then-Harvard sophomore Mark Zuckerberg, spread to other schools. "Because over 6,000 Harvard kids signed up within the first three weeks, it seemed ridiculous not to open it up to a few other schools," Hughes said.

The Facebook now generates more than 2 billion hits a month, Hughes says.

Members are partitioned by key data, including geographic location, music and movie interests, and, more importantly, age, leaving enormous potential for target marketing.

"People are always talking about how the college market is a lost market," Hughes says. "For a few years, they (students) watch less TV, they are in minicommunities, which don't interact with a lot of national media or national ad-

vertisers that other age groups do. It makes a lot of sense for people to advertise on Facebook because over 60 percent of our users are going to log in every day" during the school year.

To finance its growth, Facebook recently received \$13 million in funds from Accel Partners, an information technology venture capital firm in Palo Alto, Calif.

Facebook is now a 30-employee company of engineers, sales and customer service staff members and administrators. Hughes said 8,000 people join Facebook each day.

Zuckerberg and former college roommate Dustin Moskovitz have taken leaves of absence from Harvard to work on building the company. Hughes, also a former roommate of Zuckerberg's, will be a senior at Harvard this fall.

Facebook's success is inspiring businesses to use similar Internet-based networks. Ryze.com is one example of a site in which companies can network and make sales by location, industry or other common connections.

It will take time to see whether the online networking trend will have any permanence. But as of now, Facebook users keep clicking.

"I suppose it's probably just a fad," said Walter, the UR grad student. "But I don't see myself not using it anytime soon."

(BREAKOUT BOX)

By the numbers

3.5 million - Current number of Facebook.com members.

8,000 - Number of people who join the site each day.

2,000 - Number of colleges that will be part of the network by next year.

70 million - Number of hits every 24 hours.

2 billion - Number of hits the network gets each month.

LOAD-DATE: September 5, 2005